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ABSTRACT

Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) program administrators who wish to work effectively and amicably with faculty in the two-year technical college would do well to remember two principles: (1) work first with the type of writing that already exists in the curriculum; and (2) try to speak a language to the faculty outside the field of composition in which all participants are on an equal footing. When one such administrator first began to solicit proposals for writing intensive courses at a technical college, he received from a professor of Refrigeration and Air Conditioning a stack of one-page, neatly, tightly, and clearly written accounts of maintenance and repairs done on a particular system. This showed to the educator that he did not need to urge the faculty to require students to write or even to write more; the challenge was to find the language in which to bring this writing under the pale of a college-wide writing program. There is a great deal of common ground on which WAC administrators and technical college faculty can build, if the administrators avoid using terms which may strike other faculty as alien or even threatening. Having established a common ground by noting that much of the writing traditionally required of students in technical colleges is valid writing-to-learn, WAC administrators can gently advocate methods for improving instruction in more writer-based types of writing (microthemes, focused freewriting, and other types of heuristic or expressive writing). (RS)

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Building on Common Ground:

Overcoming Resistance to WAC in the Technical College

The sub-title of this paper, "Overcoming Resistance to WAC in the Technical College," is somewhat misleading. My colleagues on this panel are involved in writing instruction at research institutions, while I work at a two-year technical college. Moreover, my paper focusses, as does the program title, on resistance to WAC in technical programs, but primarily in such "trade-school" type programs as Plumbing and Heating, or Automotive Mechanics. (A paper on resitance to WAC in my technical college as a whole, drawing on my experience with faculty in all disciplines, would tell a much longer and sadder tale.) Perhaps, then, my subtitle should read "Overcoming Resistance to WAC in Two-Year College Vocational-Technical Programs," the length of which might offer the advantage of greater clarity and, paradoxically, get this paper on a panel at MLA.

I begin with a scenario and a broad issue. Last October, in Baltimore, at the Northeast Regional Conference on Teaching English in the Two-Year College, David Bartholomae gave the luncheon address. Some of you may have been there to hear Professor Bartholomae's near-apologia for the shortcomings of the approach to writin in the disciplines which he has been advocating over the past decade, in articles, anthologies and CCCC convention debates with Peter Elbow. Discussing excerpts from prizewinning essays in various disciplines by students at

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Pitt, and recounting the process by which these essays were selected, Bartholomae's address centered on the fact that the only members of the prize committees who voted against the winning essays were the professors in the disciplines for which these essays were written. These professors felt that the essays were either parodic versions or hollow imitations of the languages of their respective disciplines.

His presentation as a whole raised questions about the fundamental purposes of WAC, or what might be more usefully called writing-to-learn in various disciplines. The primary question seemed to be whether the purpose of such writing is to help students learn the languages of these disciplines, or their concepts and manners of proceeding, or all three. Bartholomae gave greater credit here than heretofore to the informal kinds of writing-to-learn advocated by Elbow: writing in which students, in their own languages, engage and attempt to come to terms with the languages and concepts (discourse modes, for short) of academic disciplines. As the meta-text to his talk, Bartholomae took a passage from Mary Louise Pratt's "Linguistic Utopias", a work which has had great influence in recent years on literary and composition as well as linguistic studies. The central insight of "Linguistic Utopias" is that language would be more objectively studied than traditional linguistics has allowed, if it were studied in situations where the speakers are on unequal footing with respect to the dominant language of the discourse. As is the case when students attempt to negotiate a discipline

whose discourse they have not yet mastered. As is also the case--and this brings me to the first point of my talk--with faculty members in areas other than composition when confronted with the discourse of composition.

How we approach this "contact zone", as Professor Pratt has most recently called it (Arts 33-40), has a great deal to do with overcoming resistance to WAC in the technical college; especially in the kinds of vocational-technical programs found in two-year colleges, which strike many (apparently including most of those who write books on writing in the disciplines) as questionable versions of higher education, not far removed from the programs offered by proprietary techincal schools who often boast in their advertisements, "No English or history to hassle with!" In actual fact, as I discovered recently and to my pleasure, voc-tech courses in two-year technical colleges generally require students to do a considerable amount of writing.

When I first began to solicit proposals for writing intensive courses at my institution, I received from a professor of Refrigeration and Air Conditioning a stack of work reports: each a one- to two-page, tightly, neatly and clearly written account of maintenance and repairs done on a particular system, written in a language understandable to a general audience. (The directions specified that students were to write these with clients as the target audience.) The professor required ten or more of these work reports each semester. Quite often, therefore, we don't need to urge voc-tech professors to require their

students to write, or even to write more; the challenge which confronts us is finding the language in which to bring this writing under the pale of a college-wide writing program.

The issue that concerns me, as one among many charged with establishing a WAC program at such a college, is how to give this writing and the teachers who assign it the respect which leads to cooperation, and which they deserve. It has struck me that we cannot do this by barging in and beating the faculty in these programs about the head and shoulders with composition theory-based WAC discourse. At the same time, I would argue that there is a great deal of common ground on which WAC administrators and tech faculty can build, if we (WAC program administrators) watch our language.

The most startling thing I heard when I coordinated my first discussion of WAC at my current institution came from a professor in the Parks and Recreation Department. After my co-presenters and I had run the group through various writing-to-learn exercises, and during a discussion focussing on what constitutes effective writing-to-learn in any discipline, this professor said to us, rather plaintively, "You've got to remember that we're speaking different languages." Fortuitously, I had a ready response: one which I think put us, for the remainder of the workshop, on the common ground to which my title refers. My response, drawing on an old but still efficacious bit of WAC agitprop, went something like this: "And it's because we all speak different languages that you are more qualified than

myself, or any English instructor, to teach your students the language and concepts of your discipline."

Though I was resourceful enough to effectively parry that Parks and Rec professor's thrust, it made me more aware than I'd been before of the preponderance in the WAC literature of terms and concepts with which present company is familiar, and in which we are at ease, but which strike faculty in other areas as alien, if not outright threatening. It might seem obvious that one should not confront faculty outside of composition, literary and philosophic theory with such terms (unexplained) as "heuristics". Less obvious is that non-English faculty are as unfamiliar and uncomfortable with such of our terms and concepts as prewriting, process, revision, purpose and audience, let alone the differences between informal and formal (or expressive and transactional, or writer-based and reader-based) writing. This, however, does not mean that the writing done in such courses before our advent cannot be seen to conform to the concepts we advocate, in the language in which we are used to thinking and speaking about them.

The writing required in all of these courses--work reports (such as those I mentioned earlier), descriptions of sequences of operations, accident and injury reports, materials substitution justifications, e.g.--<u>is</u> writing-to-learn. This writing is also quite specific as to purpose and audience, and is therefore formal, transactional, reader-based. The lab notes which students are often required to keep in these courses can be seen as pre-,

informal, expressive, or writer-based writing, and the work itself as heuristic. And the transition from work to notes to report is in fact a recursive, revisionary process, in both the most broadly theoretical and applicable senses of the terms. It is, however, neither necessary nor advisable for us to "educate" tech faculty about this at the outset, when they are already suspicious of our motives ("These people want our students to write essays"). Long before Professor Pratt began to explore the "contact zone", enlightened composition teachers found efficacy in explaining rhetorical and grammatical devices to students in non-technical terms. WAC program directors can take a lesson here: if we want voc-tech faculty to accept and learn from us, we'd do well to watch our language. This is definitely not to suggest that voc-tech faculty are any less literate than we. How comfortable would you be at a seminar on Boiler and Furnace Combustion Test Procedures? How comfortable would you be if asked to perform these procedures?

Which brings me to point #2: if the writing traditionally required of students in voc-tech courses serves our purposes, as well as those of the faculty assigning it, why is it necessary, at the outset, to (however gently) nudge them into assigning different kinds of writing--kinds which they may feel uncomfortable assigning their students, and for valid reasons?

I have in mind here the kinds of writing being increasingly advocated by WAC people at two-year colleges: microthemes are a good example. (A microtheme is a brief essay written on a 5x8"

card, in which the student defines and applies a concept.) A majority of voc-tech students would be quite happy at "No English or History to Hassle with Tech", and are highly suspicious about any educational requirements they perceive as having no immediate practical application to their careers. Such explicitly writer-based activities as microthemes tend to raise these suspicions quite high, thus creating motivation problems for these students' instructors. The kinds of writing traditionally required in these courses, on the other hand, such as the work reports required in that Refrigeration and Air Conditioning course, pose fewer such problems: instructors are more comfortable arguing, and students more ready to see, that this sort of writing is an integral part of their careers. Moreover, this writing is more likely to develop in these students the kinds of rhetorical skills which many composition theorists--most recently Richard Larson (343-51)--have suggested are better developed in discipline-based courses than in most Freshman Composition programs. These skills are, again to use the discourse of composition, those of producing transactional or reader-based writing with a clear sense of purpose and audience. There is an added advantage to seeing it this way: while early WAC advocates cautioned against making non-English faculty think we are asking them to do "the English teacher thing," a common ground among <u>all</u> faculty at two-year colleges is a concern over the poor writing skills of underprepared students.

I am not proposing that WAC courses in voc-tech programs

should never involve microthemes, focussed freewriting, minute essays, or other forms of heuristic or expressive writing. Some voc-tech faculty--including some at my institution--are excited by such methods for getting students to engage with lecture or lab materials, and are therefore able to successfully advocate such writing to their students. Less comfortable or willing faculty, however, should not be forced, or even strongly urged, at the outset, to adopt such pedagogical strategies.

As most experienced WAC administrators will attest, faculty egos are highly vulnerable when confronted with unfamiliar ideas, and this is certainly no less true of voc-tech faculty, when confronted by a writing-to-learn advocate wielding a Ph.D. in Composition Theory. We will be more successful in building our programs and improving writing instruction in the voc-tech areas by capitalizing on the kinds of writing traditionally required of students in these areas--writing which is again quite valid writing-to-learn, and quite effective in developing these students' rhetorical skills.

Having established this common ground, we can (gently) advocate methods for improving instruction in these kinds of writing. One example is peer review: students can exchange sequence of operations or work reports and check them for clarity and accuracy by attempting to trace the sequence or perform the work according to their peers' reports. A plumbing instructor at my institution, who took this suggestion from a colleague in sociology at one of our WAC discussion groups, recently told me,

with pride, that this has greatly improved the clarity, order and thoroughness of his students' writing.

If we wish to work effectively and amicably with faculty in the voc-tech areas, those of us charged with establishing WAC programs at two-year colleges would do well to remember two principles: 1) Work first with what's already there; why ruin or fail to capitalize on a good thing? 2) We come to CCCC's and other such gatherings to speak our language; when we return to our voc-tech colleagues, let's try to speak a language in which we are all on equal footing, on common ground.

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